

# Treacherous Texts

U. S. Suffrage Literature, 1846–1946



Edited by

Mary Chapman and Angela Mills

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*U.S. Suffrage Literature, 1846–1946*



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MARY CHAPMAN  
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And, a thank you to Troy and Clara, for making room for a labor of love. A.M.

# CHRONOLOGY OF THE U.S. WOMAN SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGN

**1777** Women lose the right to vote in New York State.

**1780** Women lose the right to vote in Massachusetts.

**1784** Women lose the right to vote in New Hampshire.

**1787** U.S. Constitutional Convention places voting qualifications in the hands of the states. Women in all states except New Jersey lose the right to vote.

**1792–1838** The constitutions of Connecticut, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia exclude African Americans from voting but expand white male suffrage.

**1807** Women lose the right to vote in New Jersey.

**1834** In a petition to the federal government regarding the abolition of slavery in Washington, D.C., Ohio farmwomen request “the immediate enfranchisement of every human being that shall tread this soil.”

**1846** Women of Jefferson County, New York, submit a petition to the New York state legislature requesting woman suffrage.

**1848** Seneca Falls Convention adopts a “Declaration of Sentiments” that demands, among other rights, the “sacred right to the elective franchise” for women. New York state legislature passes a Married Women’s Property Law, enabling married women to own property.

**1850** First annual National Woman’s Rights Convention is held in Worcester, Massachusetts, with representatives from eleven states attending.

**1855** Elizabeth Cady Stanton appears before the New York state legislature to advocate for an expanded Married Women’s Property Law.

**1867** Kansas holds the world’s first referendum on woman suffrage. It is defeated.

**1868** The Fourteenth Amendment (whose second section effectively defines citizens as “male”) is ratified. Stanton and Anthony found *The Revolution*, a weekly suffrage newspaper. To test judicial interpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment 172 New Jersey women attempt to vote. In subsequent elections throughout the 1870s, Anthony and other women try to vote. The Fifteenth Amendment, enfranchising black men, passes Congress.

**1869** Lucy Stone, Henry Ward Beecher, Henry Blackwell, Frederick Douglass, and others work for the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment; they form the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). Anthony and Stanton refuse to work for the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment; they form the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Wyoming Territory grants full voting rights to women. Anthony encourages women to move en masse to Wyoming.

**1870** Utah Territory grants full voting rights to women. The Fifteenth Amendment prohibits states from denying citizens the vote based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” AWSA founds *The Woman’s Journal*, the longest running suffrage journal in the United States.

**1871** Anthony campaigns in the Pacific Northwest. African American activist Mary Ann Shadd Carey addresses the House Judiciary Committee on Suffrage.

**1872** Free love advocate Victoria Woodhull runs for president. Anthony is arrested for voting.

**1874** Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is formed.

**1878** A woman suffrage amendment, authored by Anthony and Stanton and requesting that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex,” is introduced in Congress for first time.

**1880** Mary Ann Shadd Carey organizes the Colored Women’s Progressive Franchise Association in Washington, D.C.

**1882** House and Senate committees on woman suffrage report favorably on proposed amendment.

**1883** Washington Territory grants full voting rights to women; the WCTU formally endorses woman suffrage.

**1884** Senate reports on the woman suffrage amendment with favorable majority.

**1886** Proposed suffrage amendment is defeated in the Senate.

**1887** Congress rescinds woman suffrage in Utah. Washington Territory’s Supreme Court rescinds woman suffrage.

**1888** Washington Territory legislature grants women the right to vote, but the territory’s Supreme Court rescinds that right, for the second time.



- 1889** The new state of Washington defeats woman suffrage in a state referendum.
- 1890** NWSA and ASWA merge to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) after several years of negotiating. Wyoming enters Union as first state with full woman suffrage. South Dakota's suffrage referendum fails. New Zealand becomes first nation to grant women full suffrage.
- 1893** Colorado state referendum grants full voting rights to women.
- 1894** Woman suffrage petition with more than 600,000 signatures is ignored by the New York state legislature. Colorado voters elect three female state legislators, the first in U.S. history.
- 1895** The new state of Utah grants full voting rights to women.
- 1896** Idaho grants full voting rights to women. California referendum is defeated by a large majority. The "doldrums" begin—no state suffrage referendum succeeds for the next fourteen years. Frances E.W. Harper helps found the National Association of Colored Women.
- 1900** Carrie Chapman Catt becomes president of NAWSA.
- 1907** Spectacular suffrage tactics—parades, street speakers, pickets—inspired by British militants are introduced to the U.S. campaign.
- 1910** Washington state referendum approves full suffrage for women and breaks the fourteen-year hiatus in state referendum victories.
- 1911** California referendum approves full voting rights for women.
- 1912** Oregon, Kansas, and Arizona referenda approve full voting rights for women. The Progressive Party includes a woman suffrage plank in its platform. Wisconsin woman suffrage referendum is defeated.
- 1913** The congressional committee of NAWSA, led by Alice Paul, organizes a huge parade in Washington on the eve of Woodrow Wilson's inauguration as president. Alaska Territory grants woman suffrage. The Illinois legislature grants municipal and presidential but not state suffrage to women.
- 1914** The congressional committee separates from NAWSA to become the Congressional Union. Montana and Nevada referenda approve full suffrage for women. NAWSA presents Congress with a petition, signed by more than 500,000 people, asking for woman suffrage. Suffrage amendment is defeated in the Senate by a margin of 35 to 34.
- 1915** New York state woman suffrage referendum is defeated by significant majority.
- 1916** Jeanette Rankin of Montana is the first woman to win a seat in the House of Representatives. NAWSA President Catt introduces her "winning plan," which combines state suffrage referenda with lobbying the federal government for a constitutional amendment. Members of the Congressional Union and Women's Political Union join to form the National Woman's Party.



**1917** National Woman's Party members picket the White House daily, beginning in January. More than 500 are arrested; 168 are jailed. In November, the campaign achieves a significant victory in a large eastern state when the New York referendum succeeds. North Dakota, Nebraska, and Rhode Island grant women right to participate in presidential elections. Arkansas grants suffrage in primary elections.

**1918** Michigan, South Dakota, and Oklahoma referenda grant full suffrage to women. President Wilson votes personally for woman suffrage in New Jersey state referendum but continues to insist that suffrage is a state concern. The House of Representatives is willing to pass the amendment, but the Senate defeats it by two votes.

**1919** The House of Representatives and Senate pass the amendment. Nine additional states approve women's right to participate in presidential elections.

**1920** Nineteenth Amendment wins the support of three-quarters of the state legislatures when Tennessee ratifies it. While the amendment prohibits denying any American citizen the vote on the basis of gender, it does not ensure voting rights for Native Americans, Chinese immigrants, and others.

**1924** The Indian Citizenship Act grants citizenship to Native American Indians, but many western states continue to prohibit them from voting.

**1943** Chinese Exclusion Act is repealed, making people of Chinese ancestry eligible for U.S. citizenship and the franchise.

**1952** Walter-McCarran Act grants all people of Asian ancestry the right to become citizens.

**1965** Voting Rights Act outlaws discriminatory and intimidating practices at the polls, thereby encouraging more African Americans to vote.

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# INTRODUCTION

The story of the achievement of woman suffrage in the United States is a story worth telling, perhaps most significantly because what began as private conversations among women (and men) grew into one of the largest propaganda campaigns in the world: a campaign that culminated in the effective doubling of the number of eligible voters in one of the largest democracies in the world. By some estimates, as many as twenty million U.S. women were enfranchised when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in August 1920. Never before or since has an act of legislation enfranchised so many people. It is true that only one-third of the eligible women voted in the presidential election that immediately followed their enfranchisement and many women of color were quickly disenfranchised. Still, in recent presidential elections, more women than men vote, a trend suggesting that the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment marked both the end of a long, challenging campaign to enfranchise women and the beginning of a movement to involve women more fully in national politics.

The most familiar narrative of the U.S. woman suffrage movement originated in *The History of Woman Suffrage*, the first volumes of which were assembled by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, two of the movement's most active nineteenth-century leaders and orators. Their history focused primarily on white, middle-class, Protestant reformers from the northeastern states, who came to the woman's rights cause through their involvement in antislavery and temperance organizations. These reformers gave public lectures, organized conventions, authored woman's rights manifestoes and petitions, and addressed state legislatures to lobby for constitutional changes at both state and federal levels. Their efforts were rewarded after their deaths, when the Nineteenth Amendment, which made it illegal to deny or abridge any citizen's right to vote "on account of sex," was ratified by three-quarters of the state legislatures in 1920.

As compelling as this homogeneous narrative is, it has been complicated in the past twenty-five years by feminist scholars working in diverse disciplines including history, women's studies, rhetorical studies, political science, and cognate disciplines.



Many scholars have challenged the designation of the 1848 Seneca Falls, New York, Woman's Rights convention, organized by Stanton and other women, as the movement's starting point.<sup>1</sup> Others have exposed the racial, religious, class, and regional diversity of the participants in this movement. Informed by "bottom-up" history and by "differences" feminism, they have documented the participation of African American, Asian American, Jewish, working-class, and immigrant suffragists.<sup>2</sup> In the process, scholars have also acknowledged the racist, nativist, and elitist tendencies of the movement's best known leaders<sup>3</sup> as well as the uneven developments that kept thousands of nonwhite women disenfranchised even after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies have broadened the geographic scope of research on woman suffrage to attend to the regional specificities of campaigns as they unfolded in the West, Midwest, and South.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, scholars have also moved outside the U.S. context to acknowledge the inspiring exchanges between U.S. suffragists and women engaged in national suffrage campaigns around the world.<sup>6</sup>

This effort to revise the narrative of suffrage has been enabled by the project of recovering an impressive array of primary documents produced by the campaign. These documents—which include speeches, petitions, and polemic—were written not only to educate and to convert women to the Cause but also to persuade both men voting in state suffrage referenda and legislators debating the merits of a constitutional amendment to recognize women's right to the vote. These recovered documents articulate the primary arguments for suffrage—that the vote is a natural right and that women's particular moral nature makes it expedient to enfranchise them; at the same time they demonstrate women's fitness for the franchise by displaying the incontrovertible logic, brilliant rhetorical strategizing, and calculated tactics through which several generations of U.S. women moved a resistant population to accept women's participation in the public sphere.<sup>7</sup>

These modes of persuasion were not, however, the only rhetorical forms deployed by the U.S. suffrage movement over its complex, rich, and varied history. At the same time that many of the best-known leaders were crafting brilliant orations, other suffrage supporters were developing more creative forms of propaganda, including pageants, parades, songs, and even silent films!<sup>8</sup> These performative rhetorical forms were complemented by popular literary works—novels, short stories, poems, plays, autobiographies and journalistic sketches—written and circulated in the service of the suffrage campaign. From the mid-nineteenth century until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, U.S. women (and men) from a variety of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds published hundreds of literary works advocating women's suffrage. For every woman who dared stand on a podium and address an audience about the importance of enfranchising women, many others wrote popular literary works in support of suffrage. Some were amateurs moved to write because they cared deeply about the Cause; others were established professional writers, many of whom we now recognize as central figures in the American literary canon. Nineteenth-century sentimental women writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott, western regionalists such as

Gertrude Atherton, Brand Whitlock, Zona Gale, and Hamlin Garland, and middle-brow modernists such as Edna Ferber wrote prosuffrage fiction; African American authors including Frances Harper, Rosalie Jonas, and W.E.B. Du Bois, and modernists, such as Marianne Moore and Edna St. Vincent Millay, wrote suffrage poetry. Avant-gardist Gertrude Stein even wrote an opera libretto memorializing Susan B. Anthony.<sup>9</sup> Although many other feminist themes and campaigns are also central elements of this literary tradition, women's achievement of political voice is a deeply embedded theme in works within the tradition of women's literature that foregrounds women's achievement of literary voice.

Nineteenth-century writers published their literary works in woman's rights journals. Modern suffrage writers found a ready market for their work in mainstream newspapers and magazines greedy for content that would interest a growing female readership; many magazines—including *The Crisis*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Puck*, *Life*, and *The Masses*—sponsored special issues on suffrage that incorporated creative works as well as polemical pieces. Modern suffrage writers were also able to take advantage of an extensive infrastructure of suffrage publishing that emerged in the Progressive Era, which included numerous new advocacy journals and newspapers such as the New York Woman Suffrage Party's *The Woman Voter* and the National Woman's Party's *The Suffragist*, as well as suffrage presses like the National Woman Suffrage Publishing Company (a company created to solicit and distribute literary and policy materials for the movement).<sup>10</sup> Through these print cultural networks, rhetorically powerful literary works reached millions of Americans and persuaded many of them not only to support the movement but also, in some cases, to raise funds for the campaign.

From the very beginning of the campaign, suffrage organizers emphasized the persuasive power of literature and imagined its potential effect on the suffrage campaign. In an 1853 issue of *The Una*, the very first U.S. journal devoted to woman's rights, a contributor noted how popular fiction could be brought "into the service of a favorite principle" because it could demonstrate the "force and beauty" of an idea.<sup>11</sup> Thirty-five years later, *The Woman's Journal* (sponsored by the American Woman Suffrage Association) encouraged readers to publish original suffrage plays in its pages.<sup>12</sup> In 1892, National American Woman Suffrage Association President Elizabeth Cady Stanton expressed her longing for a woman writer to "do for her sex what [Harriet Beecher] Stowe did for the black race in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' a book that did more to rouse the national conscience than all the glowing appeals and constitutional arguments that agitated our people during half a century."<sup>13</sup> Invoking the popular mid-nineteenth-century sentimental novel that had encouraged northern white women to identify with the plight of oppressed slave mothers and to agitate for abolition, Stanton called on prosuffrage writers to craft popular fiction that could move people to consider a new, more public role for women. And in 1916, the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage sent more than one thousand rhyming valentines to congressmen, hoping to use this romantic form of suasion to "woo" legislators to support a constitutional amendment before Congress. The creator of the valentine campaign claimed that